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ABSTRACT

This paper states that the unequivocal goal that Governor George Bush has set for the state of Texas is that "all students should be able to read on grade level or higher by the end of third grade and continue to read on grade level or higher throughout their schooling." The paper explains that the governor identified eight key elements to guide the initiative, including: increasing awareness of students' reading skill levels in K-3 by providing schools with effective diagnostic tools and clear standards for measuring each individual student's progress in learning to read; promoting reading programs as a targeted priority for the $29 million in federal funding available through the state's "Academics 2000" program; showcasing model reading programs in Texas schools that have demonstrated proven success in developing students' reading skills; and motivating school districts to make reading their highest priority. The paper discusses defining good reading practice, features of effective reading programs, and new reading and assessment curriculum standards. It also discusses "Reading Spotlight Schools," a dozen schools that have been identified as demonstrating success in teaching elementary students to read, and lists 12 characteristics of these exemplary schools. The paper also cites the new focus on teacher training, new funding for reading programs, and other areas of activity. (NKA)

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by David Denton

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PATHS TO SUCCESS

school readiness for children and schools – birth to grade 3

Volume 2 October 1997

The Texas Reading Initiative: Mobilizing Resources for Literacy

"Reading is to the mind what food is to the body. Nothing is more basic or essential. In this administration, nothing is going to take a higher priority. That is why I have set the clearest and most profound goal I have for Texas: Every Child – each and every child – must learn to read."

— George W. Bush, governor

by David Denton*

Governor George Bush has challenged Texans to focus on the most basic of education goals—teaching children to read. He has made it clear that the state will do everything possible to help local school systems achieve that goal, but that it will also hold them responsible for producing results.

The governor has declared the fact that one of every four Texas school children is unable to pass the state's basic reading test unacceptable. The unequivocal goal he has set for the state is that **all students should be able to read on grade level or higher by the end of third grade and continue to read on grade level or higher throughout their schooling.**

In announcing his initiative, Governor Bush clearly recognized that achieving his goal would not be simple, and that the campaign would have to be fought on many fronts at once. To that end, he identified eight key elements to guide the initiative:

- Increasing awareness of students' reading skill levels in kindergarten through grade 3 by providing schools with effective diagnostic tools and clear standards for measuring each individual student's progress in learning to read.
- Promoting reading programs as a targeted priority for the $29 million in federal funding available through the state's ***Academics 2000*** program (the Texas designation for its participation in the U.S. Department of Education's Goals 2000 program).
- Asking the Texas Legislature in its 1997 session for funds to support intensive statewide reading skills programs.
- Showcasing model reading programs in Texas schools that have demonstrated proven success in developing students' reading skills.

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- Encouraging the state Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund Board to support technology-based reading programs in the public schools.
- Encouraging the State Board for Educator Certification to support reading by ensuring that teachers have the necessary training in how to teach reading.
- Motivating school districts to make reading their highest priority and to develop innovative reading programs.
- Stimulating private sector initiatives such as the $300,000 committed by the Barbara Bush Foundation to support family literacy programs in Texas.

Governor Bush told educators that the state "will not dictate how you should teach. But we will take our responsibility to measure your progress very seriously. We expect the TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills) reading scores to show continued improvement toward our goal." And he made clear that "parents, as well, must take responsibility for their part in shaping their children's futures."

To assist parents and schools, the Texas Education Agency, was directed to work with the State Board for Educator Certification, the state's regional education service centers, local school districts and teacher education programs to undertake comprehensive efforts to provide clear guidance on what works in teaching children to read.

Senate Bill 1

Much of the necessary ground work for implementing Governor Bush's reading initiative was laid in 1995, when the Legislature passed a new education law. Senate Bill 1 established clear goals for Texas schools and created a system for holding districts accountable for achieving them. At the same time, the new law provided extensive flexibility for local schools in determining how to reach those goals.

Among the provisions of Senate Bill 1 were several mandated changes with central importance for the subsequent statewide reading initiative. The legislature directed the Texas Education Agency to redefine and expand the state's curriculum guidelines in kindergarten through grade 12. The curriculum revision provided an ideal opportunity for improving the guidance given to teachers in reading.

Senate Bill 1 created a new independent State Board for Educator Certification. The agency was given responsibility for implementing a new system of accountability for teacher preparation programs. The board was also directed to form advisory committees to review procedures and requirements in all teacher certification areas. One of the primary objectives of the review process is to design a certification system that will focus on the expected results of teacher preparation programs rather than on how those results are achieved.

In an effort to make educational support services more responsive to local needs, the legislation took technical assistance programs and personnel out of the Texas Education Agency and instead transferred them to the 13 state-supported Regional Education Service Centers.

Defining Good Practice

In responding to the governor's reading challenge, Texas Commissioner of Education Mike Moses believed that an essential first step was to clearly identify common ground among the diverse range of agencies and organizations in the state with an interest in reading. In the spring of 1996, Moses assembled representatives from 15 different organizations to try to reach consensus on issues of good reading practice. The participants included representatives of public and private universities as well as organizations such as the Texas State Reading Association, Texas Association of School Librarians, Coalition of English and Reading Supervisors of Texas and Kindergarten Teachers of Texas.

During a series of meetings described as "honest and sometimes emotional" these educators were able to reach consensus on a set of basic

principles for a balanced and comprehensive approach to reading instruction. These principles were published and distributed statewide in a brief, easy to understand flyer entitled ***Good Practice: Implications for Reading Instruction —A Consensus Document of Texas Literacy Professional Organizations.*** This document is centered around three overarching conclusions:

- In balanced reading instruction, students are taught how to use the structure of language and how to construct meaning from various texts; the relative balance of instruction varies according to students' reading abilities and needs.
- The effective implementation of balanced reading instruction requires quality teacher preparation and continuous professional growth.
- The school, home and community, including private businesses, all play crucial roles in supporting literacy and providing balanced reading instruction.

Of equal importance are a series of assumptions identified by the group as fundamental to delivery of balanced reading instruction. The most compelling of these assumptions represent concepts that might seem obvious but often are not:

- Effective reading instruction focuses on teaching each student rather than teaching a reading program.
- Instruction is based on knowledge of how children learn to read.
- A broad range of assessment methods shapes teachers' instructional decisions.
- Teachers intervene early and quickly with appropriate instructional strategies when students do not progress.

Features of Effective Reading Programs

Building on the statement of fundamental principles, TEA next set about reviewing the large volume of scientific research on reading in an effort to identify the basic elements necessary for effective reading programs. The results of this review were published in a 21-page booklet entitled ***Beginning Reading Instruction: Components and Features of a Research-Based Reading Program.***

Intended as a guide for administrators and teachers as they strive to meet the governor's reading challenge, the report describes the essential features of effective beginning reading programs. These include:

1. A wide range of activities that involve listening, speaking and understanding to expand childrens' use and appreciation of oral language.
2. Activities designed to show children the important role printed language plays in the world around them.
3. Daily reading aloud of good stories and informational books to demonstrate the benefits and pleasures of reading and to introduce children to new words and ideas.
4. Instruction in understanding and using the building blocks of spoken language, including awareness of the sounds (phonemes) that make up spoken language and the concepts of words and sentences.
5. Instruction in understanding and using the building blocks of written language, including knowledge of the alphabet and practice in writing and using letters to make words and messages.
6. Instruction in the relationship between the sounds of spoken language and the letters of written language.
7. Instruction in how to use decoding strategies such as those involving letter-sound relationships, word families and rhyming patterns, and blending the pieces of sounded-out words, while also introducing words with irregular speech sounds.
8. Opportunities for children to write and relate their writing to spelling and reading, with explicit help in understanding spelling conventions and appreciating the importance of correct spelling.
9. Practice in accurate and fluent reading in stories that emphasize the particular sound-letter relationships the children are learning (decodable text).

10. Opportunities to read and comprehend a wide assortment of books and other texts, with access to materials that cover a wide range of skill levels and that can be read both in the classroom and taken home for reading independently or to family members.
11. Opportunities to develop and comprehend new vocabulary through reading many diverse materials combined with direct instruction that includes reading aloud and discussing new words as they occur.
12. Opportunities for children to learn and apply comprehension strategies as they reflect upon and think critically about what they read through activities such as discussion with other children and reading of more difficult texts with the teacher.

New Reading Assessment and Curriculum Standards

Both *Good Practice: Implications for Reading Instruction and Beginning Reading Instruction: Components and Features of a Research-Based Reading Program* provide critically important information in a form that is readily accessible and understandable by individuals without any special training or expertise in reading. They provide a valuable resource for promoting a shared understanding among teachers, administrators, parents, public officials and community leaders about the current state-of-the art in our knowledge of how children learn to read and how that knowledge might look in classroom practice. Both publications have been widely publicized and disseminated across Texas.

Examples of Substantive Differences Between the Old and New Curriculum Guidelines in Reading

Old Guidelines	New Guidelines
On teaching phonemic awareness in grade 1:	
The student shall be presented opportunities to: A. develop vocabulary to understand written language in meaningful context: (1) understand that words are composed of sounds and sounds of words are represented by alphabetic letters; (2) use phonological awareness to decode written language;	The student is expected to: A. demonstrate the concept of word by dividing spoken sentences into individual word; B. identify, segment, and combine syllables within spoken words (for example, by clapping syllables, stretching words); C. produce rhyming words and distinguish rhyming words from non-rhyming words; D. identify and isolate the initial and final sounds of a spoken word; E. blend sounds to make spoken words; F. segment one-syllable spoken words into individual phonemes.
On using decodable text in grade 1:	
No statement listed.	The student is expected to: A. use letter-sound knowledge to read decodable texts (engaging and coherent texts in which most of the words are comprised of an accumulating sequence of letter-sound correspondences being taught).

Many teachers, however, will require more substantive and explicit guidance than these documents can provide in the actual day-to-day and student-by-student application of the principles in the classroom. Providing that guidance is the purpose of several new documents developed by the Texas Education Agency.

The ***Texas Primary Reading Inventory*** is an informal assessment developed by TEA for students in kindergarten and grades 1 and 2. The *Inventory* is intended to provide teachers with an informal means of determining how individual students are progressing as readers. The *Inventory* is based on three basic premises:

- Children develop reading skills at different rates; not all children in a particular grade will be ready to master a particular skill at the same time. The teacher's "up-close" knowledge of each child's progress should determine when to expect the child to show mastery of the desired skill.
- The concepts, skills and tasks that must be mastered for a child to become a good reader are closely interrelated and need to be taught concurrently as opportunity presents rather than in a prescribed sequence.
- The process of administering the inventory should be ongoing throughout the school year, occurring naturally as part of daily instruction and classroom activities. Multiple observations may be needed until the desired level of a reading behavior is exhibited.

During its 1997 session, the Legislature, in House bill 107, directed the commissioner of education to adopt a list of reading instruments for schools to choose from for use in assessing reading development and comprehension and to diagnose reading problems for students in kindergarten and grades 1 and 2. The instruments adopted will be available in both English and Spanish. The commissioner also will develop recommendations for administering the instruments and applying the results to the instructional program. The list of state adopted reading diagnostic instruments will be available to school districts by August 1998.

Another important new document is the ***Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills,*** which redefines the state's curriculum guidelines in kindergarten through grade 12. In contrast to the previous guidelines, which described what children should have opportunities to learn, the new guidelines describe what children should know and be able to do. In reading, the new document describes a balanced reading program and provides substantially more specific detail than the earlier one in areas such as awareness of sound-letter relationships (phonemic awareness), word recognition skills (decoding), spelling and comprehension strategies. (See the examples in the box on page 4.)

The new curriculum guidelines received final approval by the State Board of Education in July 1997. The new curriculum will be phased in beginning September 1998.

Spotlighting Reading Excellence

Since 1990, the ***Texas Mentor Schools Network*** has identified elementary, middle, and secondary schools that have made a commitment to investigating research-based practices and programs. These schools serve as models and sources of information for other schools that are considering implementing particular programs or looking for programs that have proven effective in real-life practice. By the 1996-97 school year, 170 of the state's 6,643 schools had been identified as mentor schools.

In 1996, the Texas Mentor School Network responded to the Governor's reading challenge by identifying a dozen ***Reading Spotlight Schools*** that have demonstrated success in teaching elementary students to read. To qualify, a school was required to have an average passing rate of 85 percent or higher for grades 3 and 4 on the reading portion of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) in Spring 1996. In addition, the school had to have a diverse student population and test a percentage of students in grades 3 and 4 equal to or higher than the 1996 average for all elementary schools in the state.

Each of the Spotlight Schools has conducted

Characteristics of Reading Spotlight Schools

The independent Texas Center for Educational Research conducted a case study looking at four of the spotlight schools. The study identified numerous common threads in the way the schools approach reading, including:

- Reading is a priority, with more time spent on teaching and practicing reading than on any other subject.
- At the beginning of the school year, teachers are provided with as much information as possible about each individual student's reading ability.
- Teachers come to class well prepared and are good classroom managers.
- Teachers within each grade level meet regularly to discuss reading and principals work with teachers on lesson planning.
- Teachers use a variety of approaches to assess students' strengths and needs, relying primarily on children's classroom work but also working with principals to analyze formal test results.
- Teachers take responsibility for helping students who are having difficulties and try different teaching strategies to assist them.
- Schools use a variety of programs and materials to teach reading; no school relies solely upon one program or set of materials.
- Teachers adjust the pace of instruction to meet students' needs.
- Students take home both self-selected reading materials and materials chosen by teachers to reinforce reading instruction; students are encouraged to read for fun and are offered incentives for reading success.
- Teachers develop their instructional skills in reading through formal professional development workshops, visits to other successful schools, modeling by colleagues, and oversight and assistance from school leaders.
- The importance of reading is constantly reinforced by the actions of administrators, faculty, and staff and through prominently displayed books, signs, and posters.
- Schools work with local businesses and individual volunteers to support reading instruction.

a self-study analysis matching their reading methods and materials with the essential features of effective reading programs identified by TEA in *Beginning Reading Instruction*. Eventually, it is anticipated that individual spotlight schools will be matched as mentors with other similar schools that are not doing as well in reading.

Focus on Teacher Training

From the beginning, it has been clear that the success of the Governor's Reading Initiative will depend on the ability of teachers to implement effective reading practices in their classrooms. To help them do that, a **Center for Reading and Language Arts** was established to lead the effort to create a coordinated system of teacher education and professional development. The Center is funded primarily by the *Academics 2000* program.

In addition to working closely with the Texas Mentor Schools and Reading Spotlight Schools, the center has launched a number of projects designed to share successful strategies and current research in reading instruction with Texas educators. These include:

- School-based and university-based literacy labs to serve as models for school districts and universities with teacher preparation programs.
- Pilot-programs using elementary and secondary teacher education models designed to ensure that teachers are prepared to implement effective reading instruction.

- Multi-media efforts to provide information on effective mentoring practices for new teachers.
- A demonstration project with the Austin Independent School District to show how a district can correlate its local curriculum with the state curriculum guidelines, provide effective training in reading for its teachers and support mentoring of new teachers.
- Teaching vignettes on CD-ROM demonstrating exemplary teaching of reading and videotapes illustrating effective models for teaching reading.

The **State Board for Teacher Certification** is also involved in efforts to ensure that teachers are prepared to implement effective classroom reading programs. The board is responsible for implementation of the **Accountability System for Educator Preparation** which was mandated by Senate Bill 1. This new system, scheduled for full implementation in September 1998, is essentially an accreditation system for colleges and universities that offer traditional or alternative teacher preparation programs.

Under the new system, every educational institution—including organizations like the regional education service centers that provide alternative teacher certification programs—is rated according to the performance of its graduates as first-time takers of the board's *Examinations for the Certification of Educators in Texas and Texas Oral Proficiency Test*. Ratings are assigned both to the provider institutions and to each teacher certification area in which programs are offered. The system provides for program reviews and possible sanctions for programs that fall below a specified pass rate on the exams. The goal of the system is not only to identify programs and institutions that do and do not meet state standards, but to assist them in improving their programs as necessary and to generate information that can be used in developing state policies for teacher education.

New Funding for Reading Programs

The 1977 session of the Texas Legislature responded to the Governor's request for new funds for intensive reading programs by appropriating $32 million for that purpose over a two year period. The funds will be distributed to schools through competitive grants, and may be used for implementation of research-based reading programs; the purchase of additional instructional and library materials; hiring additional instructional staff; and providing staff development programs. To be eligible for the grants, schools must be using an appropriate reading assessment instrument and have a plan for parental involvement.

Other Areas of Activity

- The **T-Star network**—the state's satellite network to the schools— has aired a series of six video broadcasts highlighting promising reading practices and giving an overview of the statewide reading initiative.
- The **Telecommunications Infrastructure Board** is providing grants and loans to schools and universities to purchase communications and computer equipment to support reading instruction.
- The need for improved family literacy is being addressed through school-based family literacy projects under the **First Lady's Family Literacy Initiative.**
- The business community has been holding **Reading Summits** across the state to bring together educators, business and community leaders to address the needs of local schools.

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For more information on any aspect of the Texas Reading Initiative, contact:

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